

HOW TO PRAY

Ὀ. Martiana

FROM MARCUS AURELIUS

“A prayer of the Athenians:

“Rain, Rain, o dear
Zeus, over the land
Of the Athenians
And their plains.”¹

“You should either not pray at all, or like this: simply and freely.”²

FROM MENANDER RHETOR

“Deprecatory and precatory hymns³ are closely entangled, as we said, with all the aforementioned (kinds of hymns), or at least with most of them. For all who hymn the gods conclude their speeches with prayers. Still, there are some that belong strictly to these (categories), and a deprecatory one is such as this:

“Zeus, best and greatest, dark-clouded one, dwelling in ether,
May the Sun not set or darkness come before ...”⁴

“And precatory ones:

“Hear me, child of aegis-bearing Zeus, who always
Come to my aid in all struggles, ...”⁵

“And in Plato, ‘O dear Pan’ and all he prays for in the *Phaedrus*.⁶

“Now, these kinds of hymns must not be excessive. For the prayers have to be just, and in addition to being just, they must also be simple, (just) for such-and-such to happen, and also be brief; further, they must not teach the gods, but (merely) ask what they (already) know well. Moreover, when you go through all prayers and requests of prose writers, you will find that they are brief.

“This class of hymns have also been part of political speeches, if (only) as a calling to witness.⁷ For the (passages) ‘Now first, o Athenians, I pray to the gods’ and so on, and ‘Calling on Apollo the Pythian’,⁸ these have traces of precatory and deprecatory hymns.”⁹

1 The Greek is worth quoting here for its simple elegance: ὕσον, ὕσον, ὦ φίλε / Ζεῦ, κατὰ τῆς ἀρούρας / τῆς Ἀθηναίων / καὶ τῶν πεδίων.

2 Marcus Aurelius, *To Himself* 5.7.1. This work is better known by the modern title of *Meditations*.

3 I.e., hymns that pray for or against something. Menander uses ‘hymn’ in a very broad sense.

4 Homer, *Iliad* 2.412–413, a prayer that continues down to 2.418.

5 Homer, *Iliad* 10.278–279, a prayer to Athena that continues down to 10.282.

6 “O dear Pan” refers to Plato, *Phaedrus* 279b–c, but Menander may also be thinking of *Phaedrus* 237a–b and 257a–b.

7 Menander is comparing the short prayers included in political speeches to the oaths that pepper ordinary speech, like “by Zeus” or “by the gods”.

8 Demosthenes, *On the Crown* 1 and 141, respectively.

9 Menander Rhetor, *On Epideictic Speeches*, p. 343 Spengel.